On The Definition Of The Sentence

by

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It is because the question, though seemingly simple, actually involves a lot of knotty problems that as to what the sentence is, a variety of attempts to define it have been given. To solve these problems some definitions are based upon the formal point of view, some upon the logical one, some upon the psychological one and others upon a certain harmonious combination of these viewpoints. With all the difficulty in forming a rational definition of the sentence and with all the differences and divergences among the definitions of the sentence, there is next to no dispute worth notice at least among the descriptive grammarians as to whether or no this is a sentence, which presents an incredible contrast with the fact that doctors disagree with one another as to what the sentence is.

As to what the sentence is, grammarians differ from one another so far and wide that we find it almost unnecessary to make any reference to it. It is, therefore, only for form's sake that we mention here how some leading English grammarians define the sentence, revealing how and in what they differ, and adding some remarks of ours upon the definitions of these grammarians thereto.

Sweet says ;

A sentence is a word or group of words capable of expressing a complete thought or meaning.

A New English Grammar I, p. 155

It seems to us strange that Sweet should put *thought* and *meaning* side by side like this. For *meaning* is a comprehensive term for all that is expressed by any word, words, group of words or sentence, while *thought* is a specialized term for

the part of all the meanings which has a special quality distinct from all the rest. Consequently, *thought* might justly be included in *meaning*. For all that Sweet goes so far as to juxtapose these two words. This is, it may be assumed, perhaps due to the fact that those sentences which can by no means be regarded as expressive of any kind of thought, i. e. the ones more reasonably thought of as expressive of some kind of sentiment abound especially in everyday human life. If Sweet were a less prudent grammarian, he would say *a complete thought or sentiment* instead of *a complete thought or meaning*. As it is, he is too full of prudence to make such a trite juxtaposition and considerate enough to take into account the sentences of other contents than sentiments, e. g. optative sentences, which are composed of both factors of *thought* and *sentiment*. The result is that he prefers to choose the word *meaning* on the ground that it covers a far wider range than *sentiment* does. Apart from the careful choice of the term on the part of Sweet, we should, however, conclude that it is improper of him to arrange the word *meaning*, which has the greatest range of application in itself, side by side with another word *thought*, which has no more than a small fraction of the range of application. *Meaning* cannot fail to contain *thought* in itself and thus *thought* comes to be reduced to a pleonastic term. Granting that the use of these two words in juxtaposition is to be admitted, another question follows close on the heels of that of the terms, *meaning* and *thought*. It is what is meant by *complete* in *a complete thought or meaning*. If we take *a complete thought or meaning* at its face value, not infrequently, several sentences, not a single sentence, much less a word or words are still felt to be inadequate to express *a complete thought* or *meaning*. If a word or group of words fails to express *a complete thought or meaning* those which are composed of both subjects and predicates and which are unanimously regarded as sentences by all grammarians, prescriptive or descriptive, must come to be classed as something other than sentences for the reason that they are

lacking in the completeness of *thought* or *meaning*, the only result of which is to aggravate confusion. The definition of the sentence by Sweet is, therefore, far from reasonable in view of the juxtaposition of *thought* and *meaning* and of the use of the epithet *complete*.

In defining the sentence Curme is more careful than Sweet is.

A sentence is an expression of a thought or feeling by means of a word or words used in such form and manner as to convey the meaning intended.

Curme ; Syntax p. I

It is rational of him to combine *thought* with *feeling*, not to connect *thought* with *meaning* as Sweet does. For *thought* differs from *feeling* in contents and the juxtaposition of these words can compensate each other for what they lack. The defect of this definition is that all sentences cannot always be concluded to be expressive of either *thought* or *feeling*. As a matter of fact, some sentences are at times charged with both of *thought* and *feeling*, i. e. such as what Curme calls *declara tive (sentence)*, *stating a fact* (Syntax, p. I). We find it clever of Curne not to use such a seemingly plain but really obscure epithet as the word *complete* in his definition just as Sweet does. Yet in the latter part of the definition, the expression "in such form and manner as to convey the meaning intended," though it seems at first sight to be an expression touched with the sense of accuracy, on reflection turns out to be essentially similar to the epithet *complete*, only dissimilar in length.

Jespersen is more prudent in laying down the definition even than Sweet and Curme. Assuming just the same attitude as that adopted towards the definitions of the Parts of Speech he devotes the greater part of his energy to the detailed description of all the forms and functions of the sentences as they actually are, while he assumes an attitude of inactivity in defining the sentence throughout the whole volumes of *A Modern English Grammar* and has next to nothing to mention on the subject. The reason is not revealed in this voluminous

grammar but it is not difficult to infer from what he refers to in *The Philosophy of Grammar*. According to him the great number and vast diversity of the definitions of the sentence attempted hitherto disable him to afford time for criticizing each of them and so he contents himself with the generalization that the definitions of the sentence are for the most part devised to be filled with technical terms so as to camouflage want of contents. Moreover, he points out that while grammarians differ in the definition of the sentence, they are almost agreed as to whether a word or groub of words constitutes a sentence either formally or functionally or in both ways. This presents, he says, a sharp contrast with the theoretical confusion in the definitions of the sentence, among grammarians. This fashion of thinking of Jespersen's is one and the same as that in regard to the Parts of Speech. This way of thinking based on practice and not on theory leads him consistently to describe the sentence as it is actually expressed in English and dissuades him from approaching the theoretical work of establishing the definition in *A Modern English Grammar*. It is, however, not till he has virtually finished describing all the forms and functions of the sentence that he sets about defining the sentence in a simple fashion in *The Philosophy of Grammar*.

A sentence is a (relatively) complete and independent human utterance. *The Philosophy of Grammar* p. 307

This definition is adopted in *Essentials of English Grammar* with only a slight alteration in the final part of the definition.

A sentence is a (relatively) complete and independent unit of communication.

The Essentials of English Grammar p. 106

Sweet commits an error in juxtaposing *thought* and *meaning* and Curme is wrong in confining the contents of the sentence to *thought* and *feeling* in disregard of the rest of the contents. Unlike these two grammarians, Jespersen resorts to the term *human utterance* which comprises every human expression

ranging from a mere sound to a full sentence perfect in both form and function. But a little later he becomes aware that the term covers too wide a range of contents and supplants it by *unit of communication*, which never fails to add to the exactitude of the definition. When this term is preceded by the epithets *complete* and *independent* they are in turn preceded by the additional qualifier *relatively* with round brackets. Such a device helps him to make less conspicuous the question what is meant by *complete* than sweet. This definition of the sentence, therefore, ranks as the simplest and so most ingenious of all. Because it is extremely simple, it has no apparent defect for us to find fault with. It may be that so far as the definition of the sentence is concerned, this definition of the sentence is next to complete in being free from faults except for one. The sole fault is that the contents of the definition are so scarce that it tells us virtually nothing. This definition is one that produces a considerable value as such only when the detailed object-lessons described as to the forms and functions of the sentence prior to the definition itself are simultaneously taken into account. It is not too much to say that this definition is too simple to make any sense whatever independent of these introductory remarks. After all, Jespersen hardly takes any pains to lay down the definition of the sentence in *A Modern English Grammar* and *The Essentials of English Grammar* but most of his efforts are concentrated to describe what the forms and functions of the sentence are, and not what the sentence is. In addition, even when he endeavours to define the sentence, he devotes most of his efforts to laying down some such definition as can bear any closely critical scrutiny.

Sweet, Curme and Jespersen are approximately agreed as to the essence of the forms and functions of the sentence, though slightly disagreed in details but they differ from one another considerably when they are faced with the question what the sentence is. All their definitions are the same only in that they have all of them merits and demerits but they

differ considerably in where the merits and demerits do consist. To be more concrete, both Sweet and Curme agree that the sentence is a word or words capable of a certain function but differ from each other in how to express the function itself while the definition of Jespersen is far too simply worded for us to infer that so long as a word or group of words fulfils a certain function it is a sentence The ideas conveyed by the definitions of Sweet and Curme have much in common and yet that of Jespersen's definition coveys to us something different from those of Sweet's and Curme's definitions. The range of the sentence, however, which these three authors have all in mind covers much the same area, without ever any essential difference perceived and pretty exactly overlaps one another, notwithstanding the respective features of the definitions themselves. This is the case not only with hese three grammarians but also with nearly all other grammarians so far as the definition of the sentence goes.

As for the sentence once we turn to the forms and functions from the definition, the situation takes a sudden turn and that for the better. Here we hardly find any serious conflict of opinions. The only differences are those of the terms used and therefore they are no more than nominal ones. As there is no room for doubt about the full sentence provided with both the subject and the predicate; we will take only such examples as these which are formally defective.

Come !
Splendid !
What ?
Come along ?
Poor little Ann !
What fun !

All of these are of the kind that Jespersen calls *Amorphous Sentence*, about which he says.

I have no hesitation in employing the word *sentence.*

A Modern English Grammar VII, p, 124

Sweet sgrees with Jespersen that he classes each of them all

as sentence but he is not so willing as Jespersen to do so. For Sweet, though he classes as condensed sentences such as Alas! No! Yes! shows himself to be somewhat hesitant in treating them as sentences and says.

From a grammatical point of view these condensed sentences are hardly sentences at all but rather something intermediate between word and sentence.

A New English Grammar 1, *p.* 157

The only difference in treating the six examples mentioned above is that Jespersen classes all of them as *Amorphous Sentences* while Sweet does each of the former three as *sentence-word* and each of the latter three as *sentence-group*. In the meantime Curme names the sentence supplied with what he calls two essential elements of the sentence (*Syntax* p. 1) *Normal Sentence* and on the other hand he classes the above six examples as sentences lacking the one or the other or both of the essential elements (*ditto*). In consequence Curme follows in the footsteps of Sweet and Jespersen in regarding them as sentences.

As we have seen, on one hand grammarians are at variance with one another as to how to define the sentence and, on the other, when they put their definitions in practice to decide whether a word or group of words is a sentence there is hardly any noticeable divergence of opinion among them. It discloses that the formation of the definition is not so serious a matter and what really matters is to take into consideration the context or the situation in which a word or group of words is used and not to consider it solely from the point of view of the word or group of words alone and to decide whether it is a sentence or not both formally and functionally. The pith of what we have discussed is that the question of a word or group of words imperfect in form as a sentence has much in common with the question of the *Parts of Speech* where a single word or words cannot be assigned to the Part of Speech they should belong to without regard to their context or situation.